Relief programs available to assist local low-income utility consumers

By KEN HEDLER The Daily Courier

Low-income consumers wracked by high utility bills can turn to a variety of relief programs that churches, nonprofit agencies and even the public utility offer in the tri-city area.

Utility companies and the Arizona Corporation Commission also offer tips to consumers to reduce their bills through energy-conservation measures.

Agencies that offer utility assistance in the tri-city area include Catholic Social Service, the Salvation Army, the Open Door program of the Interfaith Coalition for Compassion and Justice, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and First Baptist Church.

UniSource Energy Services offers discounts of up to \$15 per month under its CARES program. Customers qualify if their household income does not exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty level, according to a press release from UniSource.

A family of four earning \$2,357 or less a month qualifies for assistance through the CARES program.

A total of 2,251 UniSource customers signed up for CARES in January, and that number grew to 3,165 in June, according to ACC Commissioner Kris Mayes.

UniSource also offers budget billing to eliminate seasonal swings in energy costs by charging a fixed monthly amount based on the estimated annual gas use by customers.

The utility provided an additional \$50,000 earlier this year to its weatherization program, which provides \$2,000 per home for increased insulation, weather stripping, furnace replacement and other improvements.

UniSource offers energy-saving tips on its web site at www.uesax.com. For more information on weatherization, call the Northern Arizona Council of Governments at (928) 774-3756.

For emergency help in paying bills through the Warm Spirit program, call Catholic Social Service at 778-2531.

Meanwhile, the ACC furnished tips on cutting utility bills.

They include:

- Servicing a home's heating and air-conditioning system to make sure they are operating efficiently. Ask the contractor to check air ducts for leaks or joint problems.
- Replacing or cleaning air filters monthly. A dirty air intake filter makes a system work harder, decreases its service life and increases bills.
- Opening drapes and shades during the day to allow the sun to warm rooms.
- Setting a thermostat back a few degrees while away from home.
- Caulking and weatherstripping around doors and windows.

- Cutting back on the hours for running the pump on pools or spas.
- Buying foam gaskets that fit inside light switches or electric outlets on exterior walls. The gaskets prevent cold air from entering walls in the winter and hot air from doing the same during the summer.
- Replacing old water heaters with an energy-efficient model.
- Lower the thermostat on a water heater.